

Go home means go home

By: Robert Johnson
The Guidon Managing editor
Fort Leonard Wood, MO

Last week was a valuable lesson in preparedness for weather emergencies. Mother Nature sent a dose of cold air with freezing rain and snow that blanketed the area thoroughly, Feb. 11. The following morning, lots of area residents found themselves pretty much trapped in their homes as roads were sheets of ice and sidewalks were treacherous, at best.

But the post emergency personnel were ahead of the game. Before the storm had a good head of steam, non-essential personnel were released from work. Beginning at 9 a.m., personnel who lived the farthest from post were sent home, followed in short intervals by those living closer. This made perfect sense, and the plan would have been flawless except for one small detail.

People didn't leave the post.

A quick trip past the post main exchange told of a different story. Some of the personnel that were released to go home and get off the road went shopping instead. And before you go ballistic and send me e-mails saying they were buying sidewalk salt and shovels, let me assure you, they weren't. It wasn't a mad dash for survival material or even a three-day supply of diapers. It was business as usual.

Seems the Army and Air Force Exchange Services consider themselves essential and don't close. Unlike the commissary, which closes two hours after the post closes, AAFES stays open.

I fully appreciate AAFES's efforts to provide the essentials that servicemembers need, but to maintain the store hours while road conditions deteriorated put both servicemembers and store employees at risk.

AAFES can respond and say they did close their store — which they did — a full eight hours after the last of the non-essential personnel were released for the day.

Their actions — whether the argument that they are essential is valid or not — compromise the very idea the command presents to be prepared for disasters. Why should you have extra formula, diapers or food at home when AAFES will stay open? Isn't a two-hour window to garner essentials, like the commissary uses, more than adequate for servicemembers to get the necessary supplies to withstand a day or so snowed in at home?

All of the blame shouldn't rest on AAFES shoulders. Shoppers played a key role in the problem. Just because you are being released from work early because of weather doesn't

mean a free pass for the day. It's intended to get you home and off the roads while it's still safe to drive. The idea that you can't survive the snowstorm without a video to watch or a new computer is insane, and the simple fact that you're willing to shop when you should be home and off the roads, defeats the purpose of the early releases.

While stores off the installation may stay open, that's not an area the military needs or should delve into, but for those facilities within the wire, the Army is very much within their right to demand a reasonable closure.

All organizations on the installation should take a hard look at what personnel are required in an emergency, and how those employees will be taken care of once travel becomes too dangerous for privately-owned vehicles. Let's hope the lesson learned of weather emergencies will never involve the death of someone traveling home because of last-minute bargains at the exchange.